

February 15, 2009

State inspectors found violations but took no action in '01

By CLARK KAUFFMAN
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The Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals told Henry's Turkey Service eight years ago that although the company was violating state law, the agency would impose no sanctions.

"Please be advised the Department of Inspections and Appeals has no interest or intent to close your business operation," the agency told the company.

Henry's is now the focus of a wide-ranging criminal investigation involving a dozen state and federal agencies. For 34 years, the company sent mentally retarded men from Texas to Atalissa to work in West Liberty's meat-processing plant. At times, there were as many as 65 mentally retarded men working at the plant and living in a century-old bunkhouse the company rented from the city of Atalissa.

Local, state and federal investigators descended on Atalissa over the past two weeks after The Des Moines Register asked state inspectors about the bunkhouse where the workers were living. The state fire marshal closed the bunkhouse, and its 21 occupants were relocated. State health officials say they're planning to pursue criminal charges.

But state records obtained by the Register last week show that state inspectors visited the bunkhouse over two days in July 2001 in response to a complaint that it was operating as an unlicensed care center.

The inspectors concluded that in order to comply with Iowa law, Henry's would have to halt its practice of setting up and preparing the residents' medication - a procedure allowed only in licensed facilities that care for people unable to self-administer medicine.

In a letter to Henry's founder Thurman "T.H." Johnson, the company was informed that unless the change was made immediately and the men were allowed to prepare and take their own medication, the home risked being cited for continuing to operate as an illegal, unlicensed care facility.

The inspections department told Johnson that no sanctions were planned and he needn't respond to the agency's letter.

The current director of the state inspections department, Dean Lerner, declined to say whether his predecessors at the agency made the right call.

"I don't think it's fair for me to sit here and second-guess the decisions made in 2001," he said. "I think it's fair to say, though, that when this administration found about all this, we took swift and decisive action. And we are not done yet."

At the time of the state's 2001 inspection, the U.S. Department of Labor was in the final stages of a two-year investigation into Henry's Turkey Service. The agency ultimately determined that the company owed its workers \$24,000 in back wages.

It's not clear whether Henry's settled that case for a lesser amount. Department of Labor officials have refused to make public their copy of the final order in the case without a formal Freedom of Information Act request being filed. The Register filed the request last week, but has yet to receive a

response.

The Department of Inspections and Appeals was back at the bunkhouse over a period of three days in July 2005. As before, the inspectors were responding to a complaint that the bunkhouse was being run as an unlicensed care facility.

The letter that resulted from that inspection says only that the complaint was "not substantiated." None of the inspectors' observations is included in the letter. The Iowa attorney general has advised the inspections department to treat the inspectors' detailed notes of their visits as confidential records.

After the 2005 inspection, there was little, if any, state involvement with the bunkhouse.

The brother of one former bunkhouse resident said last week that in the spring of 2007 he complained to state social workers about Henry's treatment of the workers, but his complaint was never acted upon.

Thirteen days ago, Sherri Brown of Arkansas, the sister of one of the Henry's workers, called state officials in Iowa to express her concerns.

"I was getting shuffled around," she said. "I think the people I talked to really were interested in helping me, but they just didn't know what to do or where to send me."

A state employee encouraged Brown to call the Register. Shortly after Brown called the newspaper, the reporter asked the state inspections department and Iowa Protection & Advocacy whether Henry's might be operating as an unlicensed care center. That question triggered a series of investigations.

The inspections department began looking into Henry's. Within 48 hours, an Iowa Protection & Advocacy worker called the Iowa Department of Public Safety to ask that the Federal Bureau of Investigation be brought in to work the case given the fact that Henry's is based in Texas.

An agent of the Department of Public Safety then called the Iowa Department of Human Services' abuse hot line to report the potential problems at the bunkhouse.

The next day, local, state and federal officials arrived in Atalissa to inspect the bunkhouse. They determined the building was safe for occupancy, but an investigator with Iowa Protection & Advocacy disagreed and insisted on an inspection by the state fire marshal.

Within 24 hours, the fire marshal ordered the bunkhouse evacuated, noting that most of the building was being warmed by space heaters. He also cited emergency exits that were padlocked and blocked by furniture, as well as water heaters that were vented inside the building, creating a risk of fire and carbon monoxide poisoning.

The 21 residents who were evacuated from the bunkhouse moved last week to a state-licensed care facility in Waterloo. At least one of them has since moved back to Texas to be near his father.

Brown said she's pleased with the manner in which the state responded to the situation in Atalissa and has tried to contact the governor to express her gratitude.

She said her brother Keith is adjusting well to his new home in Waterloo.

"He is just so happy," she said. "He tells me, 'Oh, it's so nice here, it's so nice.' He just loves it."

Additional Facts

Other federal, state investigations

Janet Elizondo, deputy director of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Dallas, said Thursday the agency is investigating the Texas-based company, but no charges have been filed. The Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals has referred the case to the Iowa Department of Public Safety and other agencies. The inspections department now plans to pursue criminal charges alleging the bunkhouse was an illegal, unlicensed care center.



February 15, 2009

What Atalissa, state knew about the bunkhouse

By ERIN JORDAN
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Atalissa, Ia. - The congregation of Zion Lutheran Church in Atalissa gathered last Sunday to say goodbye to "the boys."

But the boys weren't there. There was no one to play musical instruments during the offertory. The sharing of the peace only took a few minutes because the boys weren't there to hug everyone. The third and fourth pews were empty because the boys - actually, mentally retarded men who range in age from their 40s through 60s - were whisked away the night before when state officials discovered them living in "deplorable" conditions in a century-old former schoolhouse.

"We expected to have them here for one last Sunday," said the Rev. Lynn Thiede, wiping away tears. "Their mere presence was ministry in this place."

Atalissa, a town of 270 in southeast Iowa, is dealing with the loss of 21 men who were familiar faces for decades.

"The boys," as they were called, attended soup suppers at the firehouse, built floats for the Atalissa Days parade, and called neighbors by name. Their departure stings all the more because of criticism that residents should have known something was wrong at the bunkhouse on the hill.

"If you don't know the whole story, don't condemn the whole town," said Don Passmore, former Atalissa mayor.

Like the rest of the state, Atalissa residents were surprised to learn that bunkhouse residents had to rely on space heaters for warmth and shocked at allegations that Henry's Turkey Service paid the men just \$60 to \$70 a month. The Texas company had been bringing men from Texas to Iowa since the 1970s and had planned to close its Iowa operation March 9.

Local residents say the number of visitors to the bunkhouse dwindled in recent years, but even those who were inside believed the men were in a good place.

Larry Nelson, an electrician from Muscatine, said he did a visual inspection of wiring two or three years ago and found it in "basic compliance" with electric codes. He doesn't recall seeing space heaters and dangling power strips when he last visited, but he didn't visit in the winter, Nelson said.

"When I was up there, the place was clean and the people were always happy campers," Nelson said. "It struck me that somebody was taking care of these people."

Those words are echoed by Atalissa townspeople, nearly all of whom have a story about the workers.

Kori Blick, 38, remembers going up to the bunkhouse with his mother, who would give the men perms in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

Cheryl Honts, owner of the Atalissa Mini-Mart, enjoyed the men's daily stops to get snacks or "sody-water," as they called it.

Maryann Gatzke, an employee at the Old University restaurant and bar, said the men used to host

Christmas parties at which they would serve punch and cookies and show Atalissa residents their rooms. "They were happy here," she said.

Six bunkhouse men walked a half-mile down the hill to Zion every Sunday for church services, Thiede said. They first met for a Sunday school class designed just for them and then gathered for worship with about 20 other Atalissa residents. The bunkhouse men were a lively part of the service, singing and playing instruments during the offertory.

"Me and Preston sing some songs," Willie Levi, 62, said last week about his role in services at Zion. His favorites: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Thiede laughed as she moved behind the lectern to pull out a box of instruments, including a tambourine and a drum, that Levi would play during church services.

While some of the men had speech impediments and some couldn't read, they hummed along to the spoken creeds and prayers, letting their voices rise and fall on the verbal inflections of the pastor, Thiede said.

"There was something so special and sacramental, really, about what they were offering," she said.

Thiede declined to talk about the bunkhouse or the investigation of Henry's Turkey Service by state and federal agencies, including the FBI.

Henry's officials have acknowledged that in return for room, board and care, they kept much of the men's government disability payments as well as their paychecks from West Liberty Foods. In some cases, the men would have been paid about 44 cents an hour, according to information provided by the company and family members.

Other Atalissa residents said they've been shaken by what they've learned in the last week about the company.

"Henry's became more secretive over the years," said Kirsten Holmquist, 50. The company stopped hosting parties and erected a fence around the property, she said.

Holmquist, like other residents, thought the bunkhouse was being monitored by the government.

"I assumed the state knew about the place, or I would have been more concerned," she said.

Atalissa residents who had visited when the company still held Christmas parties said they didn't think the building was in bad shape. Although the gaudy green building with a muddy yard doesn't look like much at this time of year, flowers planted by the men each spring filled the surroundings with color, residents said.

Gatzke, who used to work side by side with the men, cutting and eviscerating turkeys, said she believes Henry's fed them well, took them to the doctor when they were sick, and gave them spending money.

"A lot of them didn't realize what the value of money was," she said.

Ron Blick, 67, lives a few blocks from the bunkhouse but said he didn't realize that conditions had deteriorated. He was upset to learn about allegations that Henry's kept much of the men's earnings.

"It's got me stumped that whoever was taking care of them was treating them so bad," Blick said. "It's terrible, really."

Michael Zuber, 58, said he wondered what went on up at the bunkhouse, but never explored it.

"I've given them rides before," he said. "They bragged about their jobs. They did the dirtiest jobs there

were."

City Clerk Connie Black said Atalissa paid to fix the bunkhouse boiler in 2001, even though Henry's Turkey Service was responsible for interior upkeep.

Henry's officials came to the city at a later date and said they were going to switch to baseboard heat, she said. The company never said they planned to use space heaters, according to Black.

The state fire marshal ordered the evacuation of the men from the bunkhouse Feb. 7 after discovering the boiler was not in use and the building was being warmed by solely by space heaters.

The building's windows were boarded up to keep out the cold, and some doors were padlocked. Water heaters vented inside the building, creating an additional risk of fire and carbon monoxide poisoning, officials said.

J. Bennett, an Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals administrator, described conditions as "deplorable."

Warren Davis, a Henry's employee, gave reporters and photographers a tour of the bunkhouse Thursday. The three-story building resembled a rundown fraternity house where communal living has taken a toll. There were leaky ceilings and stained mattresses. There were also signs of comfort, including a large flat-screen television, pool table and decorations left over from holiday parties.

State officials have said they plan to file criminal charges against the company or its representatives for running an unlicensed care center. That's a misdemeanor offense in Iowa, punishable by up to one year in jail and a fine of up to \$1,875.

Black, the city clerk, said she didn't know which agencies might have done inspections of the bunkhouse; Atalissa doesn't have a building inspector.

Atalissa Mayor Joe Blick didn't return phone calls for this article.

City leaders will have a chance to explain more when they speak to the Legislature's Government Oversight Committee this week in Des Moines.

Atalissa city officials kept their noses out of Henry's operations, the town's former mayor said.

"The reason we were not involved was because they are a privately run company," Passmore said.

He speculated last week that Henry's didn't tell city officials about the nonfunctioning boiler because they wanted to save money by using space heaters.

"The boys deserved better than that," said Passmore, who served as Atalissa's fire chief for 28 years.

Atalissa residents say they are glad that the bunkhouse men have found a new home at a licensed residential care facility in Waterloo.

The town sign, which says Atalissa has 271 people "plus two grumps," may have to be changed now that nearly 10 percent of the population has left. A little of the town's spirit has also evaporated.

"We'll do what we can to heal as a community," Thiede said.



February 12, 2009

Tour of Atalissa bunkhouse shows dirty, unsafe conditions

ERIN JORDAN

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Atalissa, Ia. — The 106-year-old former schoolhouse here where 21 men who are mentally retarded had lived until recently is dirty, poorly maintained and unsafe. But the building also shows signs of the fun the men had over the past 34 years.

This morning, Warren Davis, 73, gave The Des Moines Register a tour of the building, locally known as the "bunkhouse." The State Fire Marshal's ordered the building closed on Saturday because of unsafe conditions. The men have been moved to a licensed care facility in Waterloo.

The three-story building is centered around the school's former gymnasium, where Henry's Turkey Service used to host holiday parties for the men and community members.

A disco ball hangs over the middle of the gymnasium. Decorations, including a wooden board painted like a cowboy and showgirl for people to stand behind and take photos, were off to the side. An old-style barber chair, with tufts of hair scattered on the floor around it, was in the corner of gym.

The gym's former stage is now a recreation area with a shiny, new flat-screen television, shabby chairs and a pool table.

The bunkhouse's kitchen has been tidied. However, grease covered the oven and light fixtures and the kitchen's wooden floor is sinking underneath the rubber safety mats. Vegetables, sour cream, cheese and other fresh food were in a half-dozen refrigerators, while 13 deep freezers line walls in the gym and dining area.

The men's rooms are spread throughout the first and second-floors. Many of the men's belongings, including clothes, videotapes, toys, tools and other keepsakes, are still in the rooms. Davis said the Iowa Department of Human Services plans to remove some items later this week.

Space heaters are visible in almost every room — which was one of the reasons the State Fire Marshal ordered the men to be evacuated. There is also plastic or foil insulation over the windows on the building's upper level. Many doors are locked throughout the building.

The bathrooms smell of urine and mold and the primary-colored paint is peeling around the leaky showers.

Read more about the bunkhouse in Friday's Des Moines Register or return later today to DesMoinesRegister.com.

Additional Facts

Register's use of 'mentally retarded'

The Des Moines Register is using the term "mentally retarded" in reference to the Henry's Turkey Service workers. Some readers have expressed a preference for the phrase "mentally disabled," which describes a broad array of issues that can include behavior disorders and serious illnesses. "Mentally retarded" is an accepted medical term that describes a specific diagnosis for people with impaired thinking skills.



February 10, 2009

Pulled from their routine, meat plant workers' future is uncertain

By ERIN JORDAN
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Muscatine, Ia. - Willie Levi knows a lot about turkeys.

His mother raised wild turkeys while he was growing up in Orange, Texas, but most of Levi's experience has come from more than 30 years of working at turkey plants, much of that time at West Liberty Foods in Muscatine County.

"I used to drive turkeys onto a truck," said Levi, 62. "I waved a rubber hose and scared them."

Levi is one of 21 mentally retarded men in the custody of the Iowa Department of Human Services after the state fire marshal closed down a group home in Atalissa - known to local residents as the "bunkhouse" - where the men had lived for decades. State officials are now investigating Henry's Turkey Service, a Texas-based company that has served as the men's employer, landlord and caretaker.

The men, ranging in age from 39 to early 70s, have been staying at a Muscatine hotel since Saturday night. They shuttled between haircuts and dentist appointments Monday, spending down time listening to music or playing cards with social workers.

Levi and two friends agreed to talk to The Des Moines Register about their lives before and after coming to Iowa. They talked about their bosses, saying good things about one man, bad things about another. They rattled off the names of the friends they made in Atalissa and described trips to the Adventureland and Six Flags amusement parks.

But a common theme in the 50-minute conversation was work: chasing turkeys, hanging turkeys and gutting turkeys, day after day, year after year.

"You've got to wear safety glasses and helmets. You also wear rubber gloves," said Preston Pate, 59. The Texas native is shy, but he described building a float for an Atalissa town parade and dressing up as a clown.

Ronnie Lashley, a 57-year-old giant who goes by the nickname Cowboy, grew up in Houston and loves the Astros baseball team.

He talks about his daily routine, which involves waking up at the bunkhouse in the early hours, climbing aboard a cold bus and riding five miles to West Liberty Foods. Lashley's voice is hard to understand, but he makes up for it with big gestures designed to get laughs from his friends and the social workers.

"Cowboy hates to be cold," Levi said.

Levi doesn't like the cold much either since he slipped on the ice Friday and broke his kneecap. His bosses didn't believe him at first and questioned his wanting to stay home from work, he said.

It's hard to tell how much the men understand about the investigation into Henry's Turkey Service, but

they know they didn't go to work on Monday.

"I'm retired," Lashley said, tossing his baseball cap in the air.

Like turkeys, music has been a part of Levi's life since he was a child. Out of his pocket, he pulled a comb wrapped in a plastic sack. He blew on the plastic, making a kazoo-like sound. He also plays spoons along with Aretha Franklin's "Respect," putting the bowl of one plastic spoon in his mouth and tapping it with another.

"I'd like to take a music class," Levi said.

The future is uncertain for the 21 men, who have become like brothers over the years.

"They are family and have been living together for a number of years," said Denise Gonzales, a service area manager for the DHS. "We want to move them to a more permanent place, but we don't want to move them more than once."

Additional Facts

The story so far

YEARS PAST: For decades, several dozen mentally retarded men from Texas have been working in Atalissa as employees of Henry's Turkey Service, a Texas firm.

THIS WEEKEND: Government officials evacuated the men from the bunkhouse in which they stayed while they were working.

MONDAY: The state declared the men to be dependent adults.



February 10, 2009

State prepares to charge disabled men's employer

By CLARK KAUFFMAN
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The 21 mentally retarded men who have lived for decades in a century-old bunkhouse in rural Atalissa were declared dependent adults Monday, opening the door to criminal prosecution of their employer.

At the same time, Muscatine County prosecutors filed a court petition seeking an emergency order placing the men under the protective supervision of the Iowa Department of Human Services.

A company called Henry's Turkey Service has sent mentally retarded men from Texas to work in the West Liberty meat-processing plant since the 1970s. Henry's housed the men in a bunkhouse leased from the city of Atalissa for \$600 per month. Payroll records obtained by The Des Moines Register indicate that each month Henry's has deducted \$1,000 or more from some of the workers' paychecks to pay for room, board and "kind care."

Sen. Joe Bolkcom, D-Iowa City, said Monday that it appeared all the money the men were making was routed to a bank account in Texas, where Henry's Turkey Service is based. The men lived on \$60 to \$70 per month, he said.

"This seems to me it is virtually slave labor here in our state," Bolkcom said.

Also on Monday, new details emerged about the living conditions in the bunkhouse, and Gov. Chet Culver said Iowa might need to reassess its laws related to homes for dependent adults.

The 21 men were evacuated from the bunkhouse Saturday night after the state fire marshal said the building posed an immediate fire hazard. They were taken to a motel in Muscatine, where they've spent the past two days with state social workers.

State fire officials said the boiler in the bunkhouse hadn't worked for at least six years, and the building was being warmed by space heaters. The home's windows were boarded up to keep out the cold, and some of the doors were padlocked shut. Water heaters were allegedly vented inside the house, creating an additional risk of fire and carbon monoxide poisoning.

"Let me be very clear," Culver said. "The state of Iowa is not going to stand for this type of treatment to people who deserve our support and protection. Other unlicensed residential facilities should be on notice: We are going to find you and shut you down."

Because these types of boarding houses fall through the gaps in the state's regulatory system, no one knows how many exist.

On Monday, state social workers completed evaluations of the 21 men who lived at the Atalissa bunkhouse. They concluded all of the men were "dependent adults" - a finding that is likely to have legal repercussions for Henry's Turkey Service, according to one state official.

Under Iowa law, a group home that houses three or more dependent adults is considered a care facility that must be licensed and inspected. The bunkhouse operated without a license and had never been subjected to a health-facility inspection.

Running an unlicensed care center in Iowa is a misdemeanor, punishable by up to one year in jail and a fine of up to \$1,875.

David Werning, spokesman for the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals, said the agency was seeking to file a criminal charge of running an unlicensed care center. He said it had yet to be determined whether the charge would be filed against an individual or a company.

The man who runs Henry's Turkey Service, Kenneth J. Henry of Texas, has declined to answer questions about the company's operations.

There are no potential fines associated with the fire safety violations because Henry's complied with the fire marshal's order to evacuate the workers.

Culver said he expected that there might soon be some changes made to Iowa law.

"It's likely we'll have some more teeth in our laws and administrative rules to prevent this from happening again," Culver said. "How effective are those fines, and could we do more to deter this type of thing from happening again? But I think it's too soon to know the extent of the potentially criminal and civil penalties and fines. I think this is going to be a very extensive and thorough legal process."

Henry's Turkey Service has operated for years in Atalissa with the knowledge of city officials and some state inspectors. The city owns the 106-year-old bunkhouse and rents it to the firm.

The company's treatment of the workers was publicized throughout Iowa in 1979 and the mid-1980s. The Department of Inspections and Appeals visited the bunkhouse in 2001 and 2005 but concluded it wasn't then operating as an unlicensed care center.

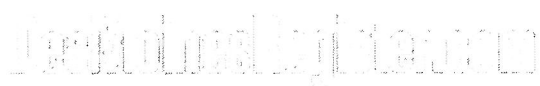
At a news conference Monday, Culver said the state "responded quickly" to the situation and shut down the operation within a few days of being informed that the company was still in operation and that the workers were at risk of abuse.

The state had been "led to believe by Henry's Turkey Services that these were not dependent adults," Culver said.

Department of Human Services Director Gene Gessow said that although the state investigation wasn't finished, it appeared that Henry's Turkey Service had access not only to the workers' income from the meat-processing plant, but also to their income from disability assistance. He said all of the men appeared to be recipients of Supplemental Security Income, which is paid out to the elderly and the disabled.

Gessow said some workers were receiving treatment for medical conditions, including dental problems and hand injuries that might be tied to their work in the processing plant. One worker is scheduled to have surgery for a broken kneecap.

Two representatives of Henry's Turkey Service had moved into the bunkhouse recently, along with a skunk and a raccoon they were keeping as pets, state inspectors said. The skunk and the raccoon were stored in cages inside the building.



February 8, 2009

Company accused of exploiting disabled; state closes home

By CLARK KAUFFMAN
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Atalissa, Ia. — Federal police, state health inspectors and county prosecutors descended on this eastern Iowa town over the weekend, launching a major investigation into the care and treatment of a group of mentally retarded men and ordering an emergency evacuation of the men's living quarters.

The investigation focuses on Henry's Turkey Service, a Texas-based company that for 34 years has employed dozens of mentally retarded men who work at the West Liberty Foods meat-processing plant in Muscatine County.

Late Saturday, the state fire marshal shut down the deteriorating building — known locally as "the bunkhouse" — that for decades has served as housing for Henry's workers. State social workers moved the 21 occupants of the bunkhouse to a hotel where they were expected to spend the night.

Officials from the U.S. Department of Justice, which investigates allegations of civil rights violations against the disabled, were on the scene Saturday night, as were agents of the FBI.

J. Bennett, an Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals administrator, was in the bunkhouse Saturday and described conditions as "deplorable." Department spokesman David Werning said it appeared that the building, which is owned by the city of Atalissa, was heated solely by space heaters.

Since the late 1970s, Henry's Turkey Service has been shipping mentally retarded men from Texas to Iowa to work in the West Liberty plant. Henry's has acted as the workers' employer, landlord and caregiver — paying the men a reduced wage for their work at the plant and then deducting from their pay the cost of room, board and care. Payroll records indicate the men are left with as little as \$65 per month in salary.

"My God, this is an embarrassment to the state of Iowa," said Sylvia Piper of Iowa Protection and Advocacy, a federally funded group that oversees services for the disabled. "This should not be happening in our state."

Kenneth J. Henry, who runs Henry's Turkey Service, declined to comment. "I'm not going to answer any of your questions," he told The Des Moines Register on Friday.

Last Tuesday, The Register asked mental health advocates and state officials about Henry's and the workers' living conditions in Atalissa. On Friday, state health inspectors, abuse investigators, county prosecutors and police were at the bunkhouse. The investigation intensified on Saturday with additional involvement by federal agents.

Their investigation is focused primarily on the potential financial exploitation of the workers, all of whom are expected to lose their jobs in the next few weeks.

State officials say the 21 men who were at the bunkhouse Saturday have worked for Henry's for at least 20 years. Keith Brown, 57, has lived there since 1979. His sister, Sherri Brown, said her brother has \$80 in the bank after working 30 years for Henry's.

Payroll records obtained by the Register show that in January Henry's Turkey Service deducted \$487

from Brown's earnings to pay for his room and board. The company also deducted \$572 for "kind care," although the bunkhouse is an unregulated group home, not a facility that provides medical care or assistance.

Sherri Brown said she recently asked company officials where her brother's wages and Social Security payments have gone and received only vague assurances that nothing was amiss.

"I'm angry," she said. "I want to get some answers."

Inspectors visited bunkhouse before

The 106-year-old bunkhouse, once a school, sits high on a windswept hilltop in Atalissa.

The cracked foundation, locked doors, and boarded-up windows have long given the structure the appearance of an abandoned building. Several signs warn visitors to keep out unless they are "authorized."

The building, until Saturday's emergency evacuation, was home for the mentally retarded men working for Henry's Turkey Service. In 1979, Henry's had 60 men living in the building, sleeping on iron-frame bunks. Back then, the state of Texas was referring mentally handicapped people to Henry's and giving the company money for skills training.

Most of the 21 men who were evacuated from the building Saturday are now in their 50s and 60s.

Typically, their days began at 2:30 a.m., when they were awakened. At 4:30 a.m., they were taken into the still-dark yard and loaded into passenger vans for the six-mile drive to the West Liberty plant. Once there, they donned protective clothing and went to work "on the line," cleaning turkeys. Gene Berg, a 53-year-old cancer patient, has worked there as a "gut puller." Billy and Robert Penner, two brothers in their 60s, have pulled guts and plucked feathers.

Henry's paid the men a "handicap wage" that is about half the typical salary of other employees. That reflects that these men, at least in theory, are not as productive as their nonhandicapped co-workers. It's a controversial, but legal, process: With the permission of the U.S. Department of Labor, a company can pay subminimum wages to disabled workers who would otherwise not be employable.

Although the men work at West Liberty Foods, they are employees of Henry's Turkey Service, which has a contract to supply the plant with laborers. The contract expires March 8.

Last week, Henry's Turkey Service was planning to send the remaining 21 men back to Texas. Many of the men have no family, and some were expected to end up in care facilities, depending on their level of disability. As part of the current investigation, state social workers are now trying to assess the men's needs and measure their degree of dependence.

It's not the first time government officials have made that sort of assessment. In 2001 and 2005, the state inspections department visited the building in response to complaints that it was an unlicensed care center — a rooming house for people who needed skilled care. Inspectors concluded the men weren't that dependent, so no action was taken.

In 1979, Henry's was the focus of a grand jury investigation. One of the company's executives was indicted on charges of transporting illegal aliens from Texas to other states. Although the outcome of that case isn't clear, Henry's continued to do business in Iowa, bringing mentally retarded men to the state to fill jobs in the meat-processing plant.

Piper was a mental health advocate in Iowa 30 years ago and recalls the controversy that surrounded Henry's. She said she's stunned the company has continued to employ and house dozens of mentally disabled men from Texas.

"It was a terrible situation we had back then, and we thought that we had remedied the problem," she said. "We were hoodwinked."

Cockroaches and a drafty home

For the past 15 years, Randy and Dru Neubauer have been caretakers at the bunkhouse, making sure everyone was fed, taken to and from work, and given medical care.

Dru said her job has been rewarding, but when the men died — as one did recently at age 74 — it also was heartbreaking.

"I don't know if I have any tears left," she said. "They call me Mom. I think of them as my boys. ... I've had some of them die in my arms. We had to take the bodies down to Texas, take them back to where they came from. We pulled the seats out of the van and loaded them up, you know, in the coffin, and drove their bodies back down to Texas."

Although several of the men's relatives praise the Neubauers, they also have concern about the quality of care the men receive. Dru Neubauer said the bunkhouse has provided safe housing, but she acknowledged the company needed to spend more money for repairs.

"The building gets cold, and it is drafty like you wouldn't believe," she said. "We put plywood over the windows, and that helps."

Cockroaches have been a recurring problem. "They're everywhere, and we spray every two weeks," she said.

Piper said one of her investigators was in the building Saturday and was "appalled" at the condition of the bathrooms.

The quality of care provided by Henry's has long been an issue. In 1988, the company conducted a series of taped, group interviews with the residents about their care and treatment. An audio recording of several such interviews has survived.

On the tape, a woman who describes herself as a supervisor for Henry's asks dozens of residents at the bunkhouse a series of scripted questions: Have you always received your pay? Have you always received three meals a day? Are you satisfied with your job?

In response to each question, the men respond with a loud chorus of "Yes, ma'am!"

"Has anyone ever mistreated ya'll?" the supervisor asks.

"No, ma'am," the residents respond.

Throughout the tape, the residents sound jovial and talkative. The supervisor sounds bored, and at one point she cuts off a resident, saying, "Billy, shut up."

She later tells Billy he is a "pain in the (expletive)." At another point on the tape, she uses a racial epithet to describe someone.

City officials don't ask about payroll

The city of Atalissa has worked closely over the years with Henry's Turkey Service.

In fact, the bunkhouse is owned by Atalissa, which rents it to Henry's for \$600 a month, said City

Clerk Connie Black. Henry's has been responsible for the maintenance of the interior. The city has shared in the expense of exterior improvements such as roof repairs, she said.

Mayor Joe Blick said he has never been in the building. Asked about the condition inside, he said, "I couldn't really tell you."

Blick said he's not aware of any housing, health, fire or rental inspections of the bunkhouse. "Basically, they just sort of take care of the building themselves," he said.

Former Mayor Don Passmore said that when the city partnered with Henry's, no one questioned how the company was paying its workers.

"No, you see, that's something we absolutely never, ever got involved with," he said. "Never. So there was no way of ever really knowing what took place there."

Piper said the city should have been more diligent in making sure workers were housed in a clean, safe environment and paid a fair wage.

"It's a disgrace," she said. "Would our elected officials have that same attitude if this building wasn't owned by the city?"

Corporate records indicate that Thurman "T.H." Johnson of Texas ran Henry's Turkey Service for decades, as well as an affiliate called Hill Country Farms. After Johnson died in 2008, his longtime business partner, Kenneth J. Henry, took over.

Robert Berry, the corporate secretary at Hill Country Farms, said he doesn't know how the Iowa men are being paid for their work or how the company collects money for their room and board and "kind care." He said federal authorities investigated the company three or four years ago for potential violations of wage laws in Iowa and found no wrongdoing.

"In the end, the federal labor board gave us a clean bill of health," he said.

Berry said that the company, which once ran labor camps in at least six states, has scaled back its operations in recent years and that all of the Atalissa workers are in the process of being "retired." In December, 30 men lived in the building; about 10 of them were taken back to Texas a few weeks ago.

"All the founders, the guys who have run this for 30 years, they're all getting old," Berry said. "With their health and their age, they've just gotten to the point where they can't run it anymore."

"So, most of the boys — well, we call them 'boys,' but they are men with mental health issues — who have been up there for 30 or so years, they've mostly been placed out to other facilities."

"These guys have grown up together"

The highway sign on the edge of Atalissa claims the town has a population of 271 people plus "two grumps."

With the residents of the bunkhouse leaving, a big part of the town is disappearing. For decades, the men have been a regular fixture at the town's convenience store and at church.

Dru Neubauer said 20 of the 21 remaining men want to stay in Atalissa. She said she worries that they will be separated and sent to different care facilities throughout Texas.

"These guys have grown up together," she said. "They're brothers. I don't want to see them scattered."

Passmore, the former Atalissa mayor, is concerned, too.

"I tell you what, I hate to see those boys go," he said. "They are a big part of this community. They fit in here just dandy, and they're great neighbors."

Six of the men who left the bunkhouse a few weeks ago now live at Terrace West, a state-licensed nursing home in Midland, Texas. A supervisor there, Ruth Day, said Friday that they are all doing well.

"Oh, they stick together," she said. "But the other residents here have really accepted them, and they are all doing great. They're well taken care of here."

Before Saturday's evacuation, Neubauer had said she wanted to continue caring for the men there — even if Henry's was no longer part of the picture.

It's possible that some of the men have needs that can be met only in a licensed care facility — in which case they will have to move from Atalissa. Others, however, might be independent enough that they can live in a group home. If so, government assistance might cover their living expenses so they wouldn't have to work in a meat-processing plant.

Keith Brown is one of the men who would like to stay in Iowa. His sister Sherri sends him regular shipments of his favorite foods, Dr Pepper and Pringles potato chips, and says she wants Keith to be happy. Her main concern, though, is that he receive the care and attention he deserves.

"I want him to be safe," she says. "I want what's best for him."

Mary Etta Lane, a Missouri mental-health advocate who investigated Henry's when she worked in Iowa during the 1980s, said she is discouraged that over the past 30 years so little progress has been made in caring for the mentally disabled.

"These are real people, the same as you and me," she said. "Why do they have to live in an old schoolhouse and go to work every day in a meat-processing plant? You know, this is the heartland. We're supposed to have some values."

Additional Facts

West Liberty Foods response

West Liberty Foods says it's not responsible for the housing or the wages paid to the mentally retarded workers in its meat-processing plant.

In a written statement, the company's attorney said: "West Liberty Foods and Henry's Turkey Service are parties to an agreement pursuant to which Henry's provides certain services as an independent contractor at our West Liberty, Iowa, plant. The Henry's workers are employees of Henry's Turkey Service, not of West Liberty Foods. As such, Henry's Turkey Service, not West Liberty Foods, compensates the employees.

"West Liberty Foods does not participate in the care or housing of the Henry's workers outside of the workplace. Since the Henry's employees are retiring, our contract with Henry's Turkey Service will end on March 8, 2009. The Henry's workers are retiring in three phases (last December, February 8th, and March 8th), so that they can help train and transition their replacements at our plant."